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C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 001085

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2008

TAGS: PHUM EAID PGOV KDEM BM NLD

SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR BURMESE POLITICAL PRISONERS

Classified By: CDA, A.I. RON MCMULLEN FOR REASONS 1.5 (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The NLD runs a modest but very successful program to assist its imprisoned members. Post is interested in exploring ways to bolster this NLD effort and/or find parallel means to help political prisoners and their families. See action request para 8. End Summary.

12. (SBU) NLD HQ ABUZZ: The NLD national headquarters was a hive of activity, as is usually the case, during one of our many visits there earlier in August. The ground floor of the decrepit two-story building was jammed with party members involved with HIV/AIDS awareness projects, women's self-help activities, child nutrition and care workshops, and many other civic programs. At one desk two young women were talking to an NLD volunteer, filling out forms and answering questions. We asked if we could join them; they agreed and we sat down to observe what was happening.

13. (C) HIGH SCHOOL REBEL: One of the women was the sister of an NLD Youth League member who had been imprisoned for pro-democracy activities just after he graduated from high school. Her brother has served four years of his six-year sentence, the woman explained, and had recently been transferred from Rangoon's infamous Insein Prison to another prison five hours north of the city. She was at NLD HQ, she went on, applying for the monthly monetary support for imprisoned NLD members.

14. (C) AN APPLE A DAY: The NLD volunteer explained that the party's political prisoner support committee provides up to 2,000 kyat (about \$2.50) per month to the families of political prisoners. These meager funds are to enable a prisoner to buy "a little cooking oil, some vegetables, or perhaps some fresh fruit" from prison authorities. The NLD volunteer said she processes about 60 such requests for assistance each week.

15. (C) ICRC HELP: When we asked the applicant if her brother or her family had received assistance from any other source, she said no. She did say that she was grateful to the ICRC, which had given her the equivalent of \$15 for bus fare and expenses to visit her brother when he was transferred upcountry. We asked the NLD volunteer if she was aware of any other group helping political prisoners. She checked with a number of colleagues, and came back to say nobody knew of any other source of support for political prisoners.

16. (C) FUNDING TROUBLES: According to a knowledgeable FSN, funding for the NLD's political prisoner support committee is a very sensitive issue. If local Burmese are known to contribute to the fund, they often find themselves quickly arrested by the police on trumped-up, but unrelated charges. The NLD has a very firm policy of not accepting foreign assistance. What frequently happens, the FSN continued, is that wealthy expatriate Burmese will send a trusted family member some money, with the understanding that the family member will quietly contribute it to the NLD fund for political prisoners. We estimate that the NLD distributes a total of approximately \$7,500 per year to political prisoners and/or their families.

17. (C) COMMENT: This tiny sum probably does more to keep the NLD's flickering flame alive than many other pro-democracy programs costing a great deal more. Post would like to discuss with various USG entities potential modalities or parallel programs that could support pro-democracy political prisoners regardless of party affiliation. We would also be interested in exploring ways to help the families of the prisoners, if possible.

18. (C) REQUEST: We note that that National Endowment for Democracy has provided up to \$80,000 per year in Burma earmark funds in recent years to a grantee organization called "The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)," which aims to provide direct assistance to Burmese political prisoners and their families. No one we have talked to (including the NLD and ICRC) seems to have any knowledge of this organization or of its activities inside Burma, if any. Post would appreciate an assessment from the Department, USAID, or the NED of the AAPP's effectiveness as we begin to explore ways to be helpful to political prisoners and their families.

McMullen